

Art in Malta today

by Joseph
Paul Cassar

PUTTING UP an exhibition of 60 Maltese visual artists seems a rather ambitious project. There is the risk of not maintaining good standards or of presenting a mixture of very different expressions that can lack coherence in the presentation and organisation of its general layout.

With such risks in mind, the purpose of choosing such a wide cross-section was to ensure a comprehensive assessment and valid evaluation of the present state of affairs of art in Malta.

An exhibition of this nature does not stop with the hanging and installation of interactive works by the display assistants. For this purpose a scholarly catalogue with various contributions from different authors in the field of art, accompanied by critiques on each exhibit and up-dated biographical data on all the participating artists, makes the book a document in itself for future reference.

The organising committee has also thought of extending the appreciation and experience of the art works to schoolchildren of all ages in Malta. In this way the exhibition will reach everyone. For this purpose guided tours can be booked and a special educational pack has been designed to assist everyone to better understand and appreciate art.

It is therefore a great responsibility to present to the rising generation appropriate examples to teach and discuss the meaning of art. The exhibits offer a wide definition of art which can appear in every possible way, presenting different aspects that are all relevant to the essence of art, and the different motivations and attitudes of artists.

It is within the ambitious aims of this exhibition to come as close as possible to an understanding of what art is. Encountering closely these works, one comes to terms with an understanding that is related to our lives and our achievements.

The special educational programme consists of a workbook that can be used by the teachers, parents and students alike. The Children's Workbook is one of the highlights of this inaugural event. A special animator from Munich has been invited to hold classes for art teachers as well as to B.Ed. (Hons) art students about museum and gallery education.

The *Fondazzjoni Centru Għall-Kreattività* has sought the support of different partners to make these events a success. Globe Organisation have been responsible for the production of the book for the *Art in Malta Today* Exhibition and Playmobil are supporting the children's programme.

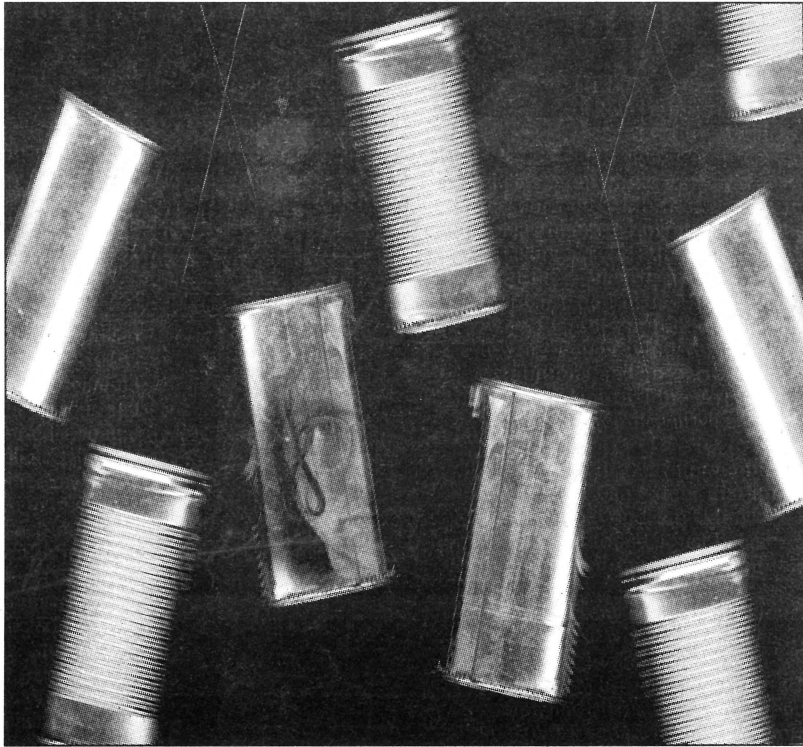
What comes out clearly in the exhibition is the sharp contrasting elements that feature concurrently. There is on one side an active group of artists, young and old, who continue to work in the painting medium, exploring ever more the narrative form of expression, while others have abandoned subject matter and have verged into abstraction, making use of a variety of media and other forms of experimentation.

There is also a strong interest and development in the language of sculpture and ceramics, photography and computer related art, video and interactive installation works. It is of paramount importance to see each piece on its own merits and to what extent it reflects the changes taking place in a society like ours, which is always becoming more open to international influences that are happening in the rest of the world.

Ours is a moment of deep pluralism. It is becoming increasingly evident from following closely the artistic scene in Malta that there is a greater sense of tolerance. At times we have even gone to the extreme of ruling nothing out and implying that anything goes.

The thesis behind the present exhibition is not to establish whether art is still being produced, but to see what kind of art it is and the spirit in which that art is made. We seem to forget that we are living in an age of self-critique, where nothing is taken for granted any longer.

The characteristic of confusion brought about by rapid changes is hardly a matter for wonder nowadays. It is very possible to interpret a variety of what apparently



PIERRE PORTELLI'S audio-visual installation

seems to be as unconvergent artistic conversations as a kind of a new Babel story. Even in this context one should remember that art is a mirror of this cultural whole but, after all, so is everything else.

Maltese artists today have at their disposal an infinite menu of artistic choices and they are free to make use of them as they deem best. Such a pluralistic artistic context calls for pluralistic art criticism, that is, a criticism which is not dependent upon an exclusionary historical narrative, but one which takes each work up on its own merits, in terms of its causes, its meanings, its references, and how these are materially embodied and understood. This is an art, which clearly has not passed the test of time, but this is our art.

A striking element of Maltese artistic expression in the field of the visual arts is a strong component where artists continue to persist in getting better and better at representing visual appearances. The island's liking to anything representational is still very much alive. This is also reflected in our artistic educational upbringing. Of course there is nothing wrong with this, but to emphasise this aspect at the expense of an infinite array of other possibilities is a danger.

There is a section of our artists who persist in being painters, content with repeating already found solutions, or at best attempting at making marginal variations. There is a sense of comfort and possibilities to experiment in manipulating a number of materialist variables such as size, hue, surface, pigment, texture, edge and even shape.

There are experiments going on, but as if modernism had not ended. It is very clear that it has not in the minds and practices of those who continue to believe in it. The question arises: Why would one want to do so? It has to be admitted that while all this can take place, no doubt, but at the same time it has to be done without the hope or expectation of any possible historical breakthrough in the year 2000!

There is, in my view, a historical explanation to all this. Imitation has been the standard philosophical answer to the question of what art is, from Aristotle down to the 20th century, and Malta is no exception to this. The Maltese have a long history of a rather conservative approach and mentality to things in general. This seems to be changing, but it resurfaces and makes itself manifest on many an occasion.

The exhibition demonstrates clearly that there is no single direction. Painters have not stopped painting, and there are countless directions for art making without having one form more privileged than the rest. The various practices that appear in the art world, which include installation, performance, video, computer and various modalities of mixed media, are all present in this exhibition.

I cannot but recall here an experience I had in Ganga, Uganda, back in 1990

when I stopped on the main bridge overlooking the river watching with admiration the enormous hydroelectric power plant. I noticed that the single, wide, mainstream current was the fruit of many different tributaries that met at different points to make up one river. Similarly, the different expressions presented in this exhibition give some indication of the immense resources that art possesses in our time.

This aspect is well catered for with a Web camera, which will allow visitors to *The Art in Malta Today* exhibition to view on computer another exhibition in England, and in return they view ours. The Maltese artists' exhibition will be put in a more international context for a period of four weeks starting on October 7 when important names from the field of British sculpture will be housed in the Atrium and adjacent areas of St James Cavalier.

This exhibition which is brought by the British Council and supported by the British High Commission in Malta will include artists such as Damien Hirst, Anthony Caro, Eduardo Paolozzi, Edward Allington, Gilbert and George, Richard Long and Ian Hamilton Finlay, among others.

This exhibition is meant to bring everyone of us face to face with the reality of the visual arts in Malta. It points to the fact that to date only a handful of books about modern and contemporary art in Malta have been published.

This is due to lack of appreciation in general and indicates to the pressing need for training more art students in the field of research and critical scholarship. This is also an occasion to reflect on art education in Malta, which essentially remains a part-time affair with artists being forced to look for alternative jobs, mainly teaching, to earn a living.

It is a fact that cannot be taken lightly especially, when it comes to analysing the level of achievement in question. Malta has for long not taken its artists seriously enough. They have been to a great extent regarded as purely skilled technical people and not as important thinkers who reflect on their society and their times. In this exhibition, there are a number of works that focus on the thinking process rather than on the purely aesthetic concepts of beauty.

Life is made up of experiences and mistakes which we make, the paths we follow, the false images and notions we come to abandon, until we learn our limits. Then, and only then, will we learn to live within those limits. This, I feel, would be a great start.

The exhibition opens on Saturday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. and on Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. It will open from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday, September 30 and October 1. The British exhibits will be on display from October 7.

Mr Cassar is the curator of the Art in Malta Today exhibition.